

Country towns produce the biggest crop of football stars

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The NRL grand final is shaping up as a Sydney city showdown, but new research from the University of Sydney confirms country footy clubs are the League's lifeline, and breed more professional Rugby League stars than the major cities.

The research published in the *International Journal of Sports Science and Coaching*, reveals [players](#) who began their participation as juniors in a country club are statistically overrepresented in the National Rugby League (NRL) competition.

Dr Stephen Copley from the University's Faculty of Health Sciences examined the ages and first clubs of NRL players' between 1998 and 2010 and discovered that size does matter - at least when it comes to the population of the town in which their first team is based.

"The playing field isn't even when it comes to clubs at a junior level," Dr Copley said.

"Our research reveals if you started out as a junior in a small country town the odds are stacked in your favour. Statistically, it's more likely that you will go on to play at a professional level compared to a junior who starts their participation at a club within a 'big city'.

"Rugby League is a sport based on strength, stamina, skill and agility, but the research reveals it's a numbers game too when it comes to first club location and town population.

"Our study shows first club location and town population influences an athlete's development, with smaller towns nurturing more players who eventually go on to attain professional status."

Dr Cobley said that the data appears to support the idea small rural communities have a more beneficial playing or [social environment](#) that helps to nurture professional players in the long-term.

"While about eight per cent of the Australian population lives in a small town, more than 16 per cent of professional NRL players started as a junior in a town with a population less than 10,000 people," Dr Cobley said.

"And by contrast, while more than 21 per cent of Australians live in a town or city with between one and two million people, only 6.57 per cent of professional players had their start in rugby league clubs in cities of this size."

The new research from the University of Sydney highlights how characteristics of the social environment can potentially influence long-term patterns of athlete development and attainment in Australian Rugby League.

Associate Professor Donna O'Connor from the University's Faculty of Education and Social Work said the new research highlights how characteristics of the social environment can potentially influence long-term patterns of athlete development and attainment in Australian Rugby League.

"The next step is gaining a better understanding of the coaching and playing environment at the youth level in these smaller communities so we can understand why they nurture more players who go on to play at a professional level," Associate Professor O'Connor said.

Provided by University of Sydney

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